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Monday Musings: Gandhian Arvind Gupta's fascinating world

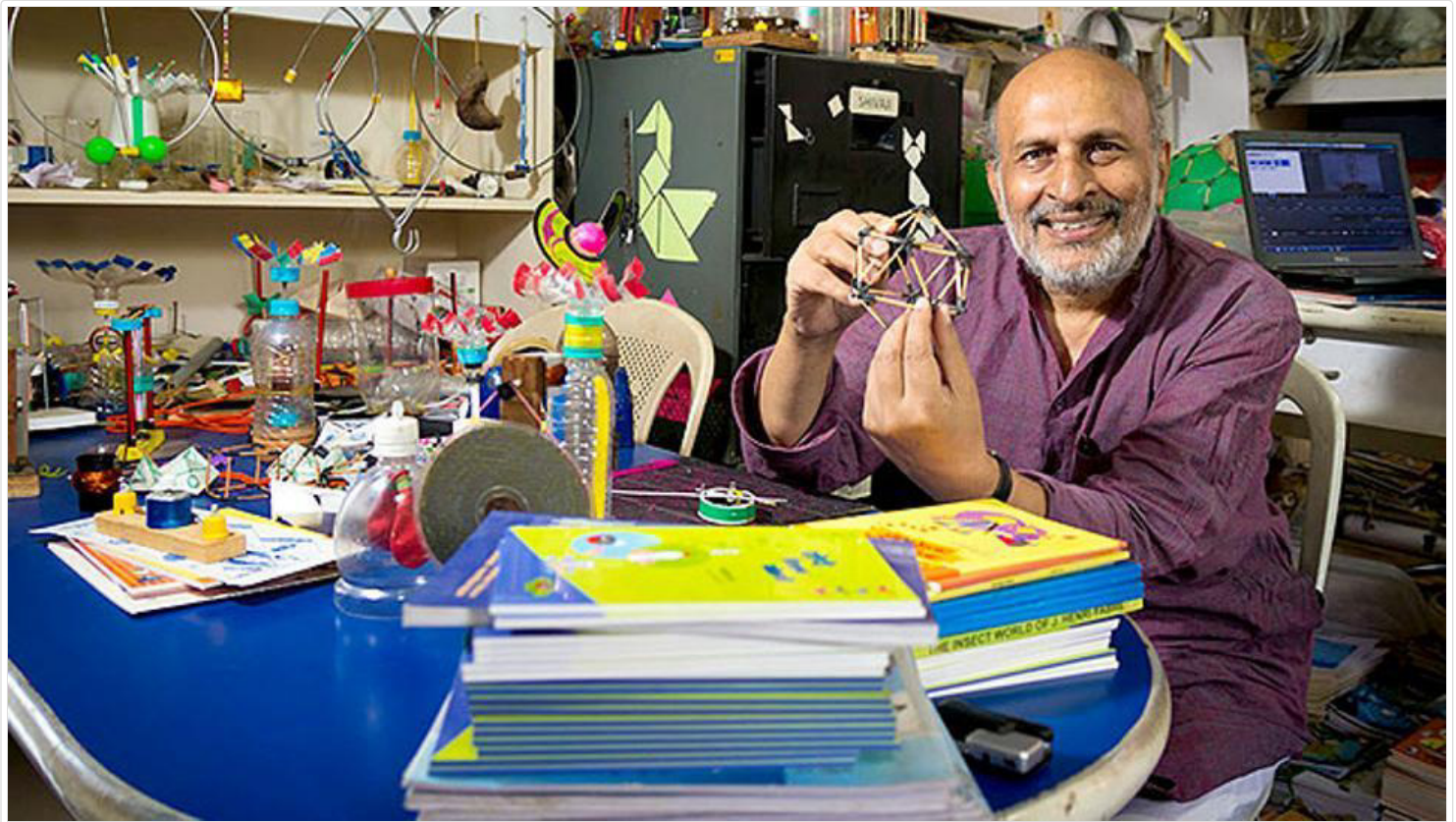
Arvind held that knowledge ought to be disseminated freely for the benefit of one and all.

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Hindustan Times, Pune



Arvind Gupta, the toy-maker who inspired generations to learn science via innovative new ways.(HT File Photo)

I first met Arvind Gupta in Pune in 1988 when he was selected for the first National Award for Science Popularisation among Children.

Soft-spoken, brilliant and unconventional, Arvind was always sensitive to the poverty in the country. He had tremendous faith in the transformative powers of education, and took to teaching the children of mess workers at IIT Kanpur while studying there. Later he was part of the much-acclaimed Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme where he took to teaching science from toys made from trash.

In Pune, he had a long stint at the Muktangan Science Centre at the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA), established by the astrophysicist Jayant Narlikar who was himself passionate about science popularisation among children.

Arvind, with his young assistants, was always found tinkering with scraps of metal and magnets, plastic bottles and their caps, making interesting toys that explained the principles of science. He showed these toys at numerous workshops for schoolchildren.

When the Internet came along in the 1990s and good quality bandwidth became affordable a decade later, he found a very powerful medium for the dissemination of his work. The simplicity and reach of the internet fascinated him and he posted pictures of the toys he made with step-by-step instructions of how to make them. When YouTube came along, Arvind was quick to create short videos and put them up on the Internet. During a visit to Muktangan, Arvind, in his charming way, spoke of how simple, easy and inexpensive it was to make these videos and reach out to the world at large.

Books, especially those that were timeless but had gone out of print were the other subject at the centre of his universe. He took delight in getting entire books scanned and made them available over the Internet. Arvind held that knowledge ought to be disseminated freely for the benefit of one and all. The Internet had made this possible and he loved it immensely. If some piece of writing inspired him, it promptly got scanned and went up on his site.

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A vast library of books in English, Hindi, Marathi and other languages are now freely available on his website arvindguptatoys.com ranging from issues relating to world peace, science, environment, philosophy, the meaning of education and literature. This collection is especially valuable because it has been handpicked and put together by Arvind.

Wasn't he afraid of copyright violation? Arvind replied with a smile that if someone complained he would apologise with folded hands and remove it from the website. Looking at the collection, it seems no one has complained.

At one point I stumbled into discovering that Arvind was an ardent admirer of the great historian-mathematician DD Kosambi. In a small way, I was involved in the making of the documentary series 'India Invented' by the late journalist Arvind Das. We discussed this at great length and it came as a delight to know that Arvind, too, had met the leftist intellectual RP Nene who had served as Kosambi's assistant. An elaborate account of Nene's reminiscences of Kosambi has been posted by Arvind on his website.

A devout Gandhian in thought and action, the Padma Shri bestowed on Arvind Gupta stands richly deserved, bringing honour and recognition to someone who has been working silently and steadfastly, contributing his mite to making this world a better place.

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